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The Griefs and Glories of Gretna.

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TO ESCAPE A MARRIAGE LAW WHICH MADE THE PUBLICATION OF BANNS AN INDISPENSABLE PRELIMINARY TO MATRIMONY IN ENGLAND, IMPATIENT COUPLES WERE COMPELLED TO SEEK IN SCOTLAND A "PRIEST" AND A CEREMONY THAT WOULD BE BINDING. THESE THEY FOUND IN THE LITTLE DUMFRIESSHIRE VILLAGE OF GRETN GREEN, ON THE SCOTTISH BORDER, EIGHT MILES NORTH OF CARLISLE.

IN this month of valentines, one's fancy naturally turns to thoughts of love and marriage. If the fates be kind, it rambles on to romantic elopements, to runaway matches, to a pursuing parent and a happy, all embracing Gretna Green.

With knee breeches and slashed doublets, with rapiers and perukes, has disappeared the obdurate parent. With

him, also, has vanished much of the romance of courtship. No longer is there a swaying post chaise dragged at a gallop over muddy roads by smoking bays. No longer are there a clinging maiden, a gallant cavalier and a plethoric father in pursuit. No longer do the postilions spur to win the altar. In their place are a modern railway train, a comfortable parlor car, a wire and a little ma-



"ONE MILE FROM GRETN. THE GOVERNOR IN SIGHT, AND A SCREW LOOSE!"

From an old print of a painting by C. B. Newhouse.

chine that clicks its message of arrest far in advance of the most rapid express.

The twentieth century parent does not move from his armchair when the news of elopement is brought to him. He does not strain a muscle or permit

tury, but, too often, the Blacksmith of Gretna laughed longer.

A MATRIMONIAL MIDWAY.

It was in the year 1753 that a Chelsea belle sought to marry a bold and bad



"THE ELOPEMENT"—IN THE TRADITIONAL RUNAWAY TO GRETN A ROPE LADDER WAS AN ESSENTIAL "PROPERTY."

From a print published in Smithfield, London, May 1, 1837.

a vein to swell. He leans forward for the long distance telephone, issues his mandate, and instructs an agent at the terminus to save the heroine from the consequences of her rashness. Romance has died out in the land, and in its place have grown up a race that loves the glory of a church wedding, a parentage that rarely opposes the will of the younger generation, and a mechanism that saves portly old gentlemen from ridicule and from disappointment.

But there were other days. Those were the days of the runaway matches, when young gallants and maidens raced for the Scottish border, for the blacksmith's shop in the village that nestles under the westernmost spur of the Cheviots. Those were the days of the acted valentine, whose characters were a passionate youth and a consenting maid, and whose setting was the bonnie hamlet of Gretna Green. Love laughed at locksmiths in the eighteenth cen-

highwayman known to her as Jack Freeland, known to the Bow Street runners by a whole volume of aliases. In that year many an unfortunate parson sat with his debts behind the bars of the Fleet. Outside the prison, touts harangued the London streets, acclaiming the virtues of their churchly patrons, bidding the passing couples to come in and be married as securely as heart could desire, and at the most reasonable rates. In this way was marriage thrust down the throats of the populace in the year 1753.

Scores of girls took this short cut to matrimony, coaxed through the prison gates alike of the Fleet and of marriage by impatient lovers. In the dreary squalor within, they uttered their rash promises of an eternal constancy before the decayed dignity of an impecunious Vicar of Wakefield. Had the Chelsea belle withstood her highwayman, or had she been of lowly family,

the fame of the Fleet would for generations have made Gretna Green unnecessary. But she sought to exchange the great name of Pelham for the *nom de guerre* of Freeland. Her brother was prime minister of England, and the

little village of Gretna Green, a waiting "priest," and a marriage that needed but a declaration of husbandage to make it inviolable. In the records of the Gretna Green blacksmith are many tales of cool rascality and of senile folly,



"THE MARRIAGE"—THIS PRINT, PUBLISHED MAY 1, 1837, ILLUSTRATES THE ANCIENT MISTAKE THAT PAISLEY, THE PRIEST AT GRETN, BECAUSE HE WAS NICKNAMED "THE BLACKSMITH," ACTUALLY PERFORMED THE CEREMONY IN A SMITHY.

Pelhams have a pride that recognizes nothing short of the church's most formal sanction in their alliances. The bold bridegroom adventured too far within the prison's gates. He was recognized and arrested.

The Pelham who was prime minister brought in a bill to render hasty marriages at the Fleet illegal. Banns must be duly proclaimed, and from the wretched debtors of the prison was taken away such part of their income as had been the perquisite of clergymen. At the gate of the Fleet the Chelsea belle drops from the story, the while Jack Freeland swings high from the gallows in Newgate.

THE BIRTH OF GRETN.

And so it was that Gretna Green was born. The power of the Pelhams did not extend to the broad lands o' bonnie Scotland, and there, just over the border, eight miles north of Carlisle, was the

as well as of trusting youth and headlong passion.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who lived in the south of England. She was the heiress to great estates, and she had a lover—a gallant youth, strong and good looking, handsome as an Adonis and poor as a hero of romance. Likewise, she had a father—a hard man—a man who personally accompanied her to the routs of the neighborhood, and who called again to conduct her homeward. One night the ball was but half over when her carriage was announced: the maid was properly regretful, but obedient, and no one dreamed of the tremulous hand that lay on the lover's arm as he dutifully escorted her to the waiting carriage below. The coach door closed upon two figures, but neither was elderly, neither had the hard face of a tyrannical parent.

The postilions lashed their horses, the horses strained at the traces, and



"THE RECONCILIATION"—THE ROUGH ROAD TO GRETNA DID NOT ALWAYS LEAD TO SO HAPPY AN ENDING.

she, all in her pretty white gown, was fleeing for the far, free north, where a man might take the wife of his choice whether her father would let him or no.

LEAVES FROM GRETNA RECORDS.

Titles and dignities of various kinds have been cast in this game of runaway marriages. There were Lord Elgin, who thus won his Bessie, and Lord George Lambton; Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough and the vain and witty Erskine, lord chancellor of England.

It was in 1806 that Lord Erskine bowed his head in grief at the death of his first wife, the inspirer of his political career, the mother of his nine children. It was in that year, too, that he inscribed upon a stone his tribute to the "Lamented Memory of the Most Faithful and Affectionate of Women."

A dozen years later the desolate lord, a gallant of some three score years and ten, stood, draped in a table cloth and a woman's bonnet, hilariously marrying by Scottish rite one Mary Buck, his housekeeper, while five of his children clung to her ample skirts. On this occasion his lordship cut his own signature with a diamond on the window pane in acknowledgment of some doggerel Latin verses celebrating the merry

event. In the hands of the blacksmith he left eighty guineas as a marriage fee. The lord chancellor, Baron Erskine of Restormel, paid dear for his runaway bride.

MELODRAMATIC GRETNA.

Woodwork, window panes, and walls of the Queen's Head at Springfield were covered with autographs and witticisms, not always of the most delicate order, with an occasional grim comment. "John Anderson made a fool of himself in Gretna, 1831." There were Robert Ker, who took two brides to Gretna Green within three years; Daniel Rae, "thief catcher of Dumfries"; and the lady who changed her name from Mistress Grimalkin to Mrs. Gabriel Grub. There was also the young lady from Tooting who married a major out shooting. Quaintest of all was the man who eloped with an elderly spinster and passed, on his return, the coach carrying his own daughter and her lover northward on the same errand.

There were nights of tense strain and grim tragedy in Gretna Green and the neighboring village of Springfield. There was the night a man's hand thrust its way through the window of the Queen's Head and a voice roared

in from the darkness, "One hundred pounds to the man that marries me!" He shouted to no purpose, for the father dashed up in time to claim the errant maid, and the hundred pounds were never paid.

There was the Earl of Westmoreland who carried away the daughter of Mr. Child, the rich London banker. Northward through the May night their carriage rattled, the horses at the gallop. Fast as they drove, Mr. Child in pursuit drove faster. He was about to snatch the trembling bride from her groom when the earl rose and drew his pistol, took careful aim and fired. Mr. Child's near leader fell, and Miss Child became the Countess of Westmoreland.

MARRIAGE BY EXPRESS.

Two minutes were sufficient to unite a couple in Gretna. The breathless pair declared their single state and their desire to be married before the "priest" of Gretna and a witness. A certificate was made out and put on the record. A fee was paid, and the couple were married before the horses were unyoked. The fee ranged from a glass of whisky to a hundred guineas, and was paid when the service was three quarters performed—an arrangement rendered advisable by the frequent incursion of the

enraged parent in pursuit. Cash in hand was the rule at Gretna.

Paisley, the blacksmith of Gretna, made out his certificate in a language that was as rudely formal as his ceremony was ridiculously unceremonial:

This is to sartify all persons that may be concerned that (——) from the parish of (——) and county of (——), and (——) from the parish of (——) and county of (——), and both comes before me and declayred themselves both to be single persons, and nowe mayried by the forme of the Kirk of Scotland and agreeible to the Church of England, and givne ondre my hand this 18th day of March, 1793.

There were four places where these marriages took place: the Hall at Gretna Green, the Queen's Head and its rival inn at Springfield, and the humble lodge of the toll gate keeper on the bridge over the river Sark. Those who came on foot patronized the last, and were much looked down on both by villagers and by "priests."

It is said that the tide was first turned in the direction of these villages in preference to other border towns, by a Fleet parson, who paid his way out of jail, and advertised that he had removed to Gretna and was there carrying on the same trade. He was followed in office by Scott o' the Brig, and then came Gordon, the old soldier, who performed the ceremony in full uniform, with a



MIDDLE CLASS RUNAWAYS HAD RECOURSE TO THE STAGE COACH. THE TITLE OF THIS PRINT, PUBLISHED IN FEBRUARY, 1835, IS "HOLD HARD! YOU HAVE FORGOT THE LADY!"

—A RARE MISTAKE IN GRETN. by Google

sword at his side. Next came Paisley, called the Blacksmith from his mighty strength and from the dexterity with which he welded the fetters of wedlock. He had been weaver and tobacconist in his long and drunken career, but neither blacksmith nor priest.

THE "PRIESTS" OF GREтна.

Paisley, like all of the priests of Gretna, took a great pride in his office, and when, in his last hours, the rumble

three descendants of his own name carried on the profession, though Willum, the last of the line, was constrained to take foot comers and cases his forebears would have scorned—thanks to the decrease in elopements after the Act of 1856. This act provided that one of the contracting parties must have spent three weeks prior to the ceremony in Scotland, which naturally put an end to the old race for the border. At this time Gretna had an average of a thou-



"LOVE IN A CARRIAGE"—HALTS WERE NECESSARY ON THE WAY TO GREтна, BUT THESE WERE MADE AS BRIEF AS MIGHT BE.

of hurrying wheels came to him from the street, he put away death long enough to join three couples in marriage, and then died with their three hundred pounds clenched in his hand.

The Blacksmith was followed by the rivals Elliot and Laing, who both did a roaring trade in the early part of the last century. In the twenty nine years of his incumbency, Elliot performed more than three thousand marriages—the record year, 1825, showing one hundred and ninety eight. Laing was a grandson by marriage of Paisley, and

sand marriages a year, the traffic having been vulgarized, but much increased, by railroad trains.

When the first Laing died, in 1826, Mr. Linton took charge of Gretna Hall, where most of the carriage weddings were celebrated. After his death, his widow used to call in a neighboring shoemaker to unite her patrons, to the great disgust of rival priests. Meanwhile, the humbler business at the toll bar on the bridge flourished amazingly. Beattie, its first incumbent, grew so fond of his office that man and woman



"'TIS ONLY THE MAIL!"—THE SOUND OF ROLLING WHEELS OR OF FAST GALLOPING HORSES MADE THE HEART OF THE RUNAWAY MAIDEN PALPITATE WITH TERROR.

could not pause near him for a harmless good morning but he would creep up behind and begin to marry them off.

Marriage in Scotland is such an informal thing that, as Lord Eldon said, it is hard to find out what does *not* constitute a legal ceremony. There is a pleasant tale of a Scots lass named Meg, who was spending an afternoon with a neighbor, when her mother followed and poked her head in the door to say, "Yer cousin Danny is doon at the hoose askin' if ye'll hae him." Meg was not confused. "Tell him to come an' ask," she said, very sensibly. Danny came over and made his request in person, and a serene "Aye, Danny," settled

the matter without even spoiling the visit.

"Married in haste, repent at leisure!" might have been scrolled above the Blacksmith's cottage at Gretna. Only too frequently was the legend justified by events. And yet to those of us who were born under the protecting ægis of a legalized certificate there is something of regret that the railway and the telegraph have closed the doors of the Gretna smithy. Folly is rarely ridiculous in love, and even the rash impatience that lashed the carriage horses to the Scottish border compares not invidiously with the modern *mariage de convenance*.

LOVE, THE LIMNER.

SWEET, should a fate malign
Our lives consign
To pathways sundered far
As planets are ;

And should some lettered seer,
Some sage austere,
Counsel, with wise behest,
" Forget—'tis best ! "

And, soothly, did I know
That this were so,
In open verity
It could not be !

For with unfading art
Upon my heart
Love, with his magic grace,
Hath limned your face !